

TWO CURATORS:

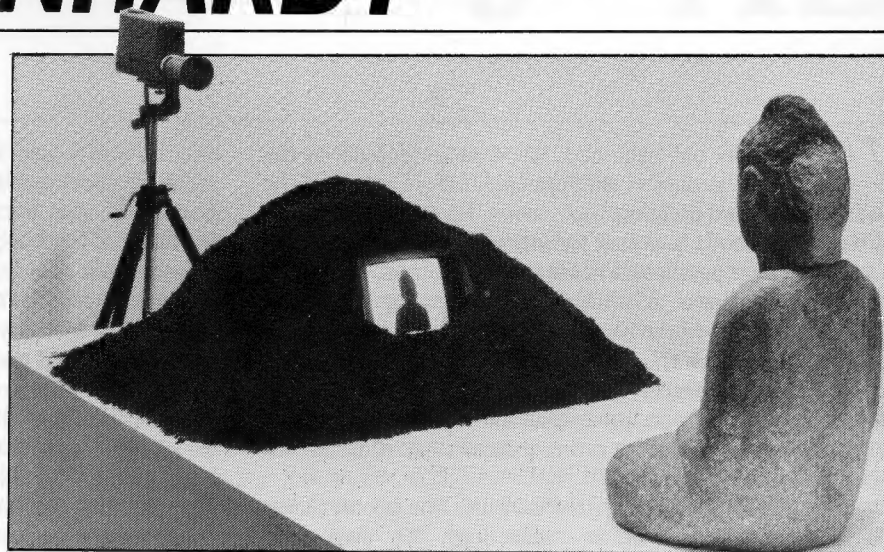
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Video/Television: Expanded Forms

The emergence of video as an art form has created a variety of styles, genres, and forms which describe its history and contemporary concerns. The single-channel format—video created for telecast and gallery/museum exhibition—explores the recording and image transformation capacity of video within the physical frame and field of the single screen. This format provides standard contexts for the reception of telecast/videotape programs, and to it one brings the subtle conditioning of traditional broadcast television viewing.

The power of this traditional form is complex and pervasive. The nature of television programming received in the home viewing space establishes a subtext to the perception of artists' videotapes on television and in the gallery. Thus within the context of the museum one seeks to establish a framework for the videotapes by organizing group and one-artist exhibits which explore the distinctive features of an artist's work, or concerns shared by a number of artists. It is important that the museum seek to provide in the exhibition of the work the same care which the artist gave to its production. The sound and color balance must be as the artist desires and the individual viewing situation must give clear uncluttered access to the videotape. In this way the viewer is given a quiet and comfortable space and seating arrangement and the videotape is provided with the technical and support staff necessary to maintain the exhibition equipment and monitors. This care is in keeping with what the museum customarily gives to the exhibition of painting and sculpture. Lighting, pedestal height, seating arrangement, placement of the monitor(s), work in harmony, and do not detract from, but support the study and appreciation of artists' videotapes.

This framework for the viewing of videotapes is a specific one shaped by both the



role of the museum in our culture and society and its physical removal from the dominant home viewing environment. The signatures of the gallery and of the living space signify architectural and ideological differences. There are, however, also the basic, technical contrasts of the viewing conditions. Viewers do not, and are not, expected by the commercial broadcasters to maintain the proper color balance of their television. In addition, the home reception of the broadcast or cable signal is not uniformly of the same quality. Thus the nature of television programming and the technical maintenance of reception in the home make little demand on each other.

The conception of television programming has changed little over the past thirty years although how it is received by the viewer is beginning to change. The changes that have occurred in both areas are largely due to the introduction of cable, which has resulted in a quantitative rather than qualitative difference in television programming. We now have the option to see more movies, without commercial interruption, and news programs which are presented as more of the same thing rather than a new means for interpreting and presenting international events and developments. The promise of cable, the radical challenge and potential that it offered for new programming, has largely not been met. People do watch more television, more selectively, because of the greater choice, and television continues to confirm the challenge which it offered to the movies in the 1950s by shift-

ing movie watching into the home and out of the theater. However, this has not resulted in a dramatic change in our viewing habits or the options that we can expect from watching television. Thus that complete process that television embraces in both the television set as an object and the screen's surface as a moving image could be the basis of a radical appropriation and further transformation of television into

However, alternative forms of broadcast and individual programs have indicated possibilities for a future discourse of television whereby the viewer might directly engage what he/she experiences on the television set. Low power transmitters, slow-scan, and cable offer community-based, and dramatically different concepts of programming. The home video recorder clearly offers new options for the viewer to watch programs when he/she wants to and to show, and own, artists' videotapes. Yet with the exception of a few artists, such as Nam June Paik and Douglas Davis, broadcast television is still a simple conduit for programming, within the traditional perception of television, where the general context overwhelms any individual alternative effort. What I would suggest is that television need not be transformed only from within those channels but also from an altered perception of the television set itself. Indeed, the cutting edge of the ultimate transformation of television may come from that work which has reexamined the television set as an object and the relationship of the screen image to that altered viewing experience.

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An example is Douglas Davis' telecast *Double Entendre*, which posits as the text of the work, within its image and performance, the means and process of telecommunications. Here the viewer and performers' relationship to the narrative is the text of the work. In this project Davis elaborated a richly textured discourse on radio and television, as both individual and collective memory is explored in the text of Roland Barthe's *A Lover's Discourse* and selected fragments of French and American radio shows. This broadcast/performance transmitted between New York and Paris established a richly suggestive metaphor for both personal and public communication.

This acknowledgement of television as two-way communication, and of communication as a cognitive process, is developed, in a dramatically different way, in Francesco Torres's *The Head of the Dragon*. The intertextual installation elaborates metaphors for television within a multi-media project employing sculpture, film, drawing, closed-circuit video, and videotape. Together, these elements develop strategies for creating metaphors and models for the cognitive process as the exhibition space itself becomes a complex model (discourse) based on the brain. The

origins of human consciousness, explored through the transformation of the role and the positioning of the monitors within the space, and the sequence of images, places video within a larger text of theory and interpretation.

The richly poetic and metaphoric video sculptures of Nam June Paik transform the television set into gardens of delight and "television landscapes of the future" in *TV Garden* and in *Fish Flies on Sky*, where the suspended sets create clusters of moving images on the ceiling. Paik's ability to transform the television set by physically altering it and exploiting the image's relationship to the television's altered form and position exemplifies how the future of television might be more than a one-way street (channel) of broadcast images and programs.

As in the case of single-channel videotapes, the museum has become the site where these expanded forms of video have been exhibited. These institutions clearly provide the art historical context and the physical resource to properly exhibit such projects. This work should be rightly seen and considered within both modernist and post-modern contexts as expressing formalist and narrative strategies, within the museum and the discourse of art history.

However, just as single-channel artists' videotapes contain within them a new vision of the television program, so the installation expresses a radical transformation of the television set and reception of the television image. Just as the museum can accommodate both forms of video art so, too, can the concept of television be expanded to accept both. Implicit within the above artists' projects and within the new technologies, such as interactive television and home video recorders, is the expanded horizon of television/video whereby the gallery space and the home space will become part of a dialectic of transformation which will take place between public and private spaces and the discourses of culture and society.

The future of video and television does not rest only in the cathode ray tube of today's television set. New screen surfaces and shapes will contribute to changing exhibition and home viewing spaces, and these new spaces will provide altered contexts for the making and reception of video art. The examples and lessons of the expanded, multi-media forms of video art point to new directions for the future of art and television.

—John G. Hanhardt
Curator, Film and Video

Whitney Museum of American Art



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